

Lincoln-Douglas Debate in Galesburg

Tayler Pulvirenti
Good Shepherd Lutheran School, Collinsville
Teacher: Michael Voss

Galesburg, Illinois was selected as the scene for the fifth famous Lincoln-Douglas Debate. It was moved from Knoxville to Galesburg because many slaves and fugitives were being rescued from the Underground Railroad at that time and there was fear of problems arising in Knoxville. Douglas was well known and every one seemed to like him in Galesburg. However, it was different for Lincoln; people did not like him and considered him a stranger. Douglas sat as a judge in Knoxville and knew the country very well.

Lincoln arrived in Knoxville on Wednesday night, coming from Peoria, Illinois. The people of Knoxville were already jealous of Galesburg's prestige at Knoxville's expense. They decided to make the most of all the small celebrations in their town. People from Knoxville gathered around Lincoln's hotel, demanding Lincoln's explanation on why Galesburg was selected for the debate, when Knoxville was freeing the slaves for whom Lincoln stood. Lincoln stood on his balcony and told the people, "My friends, the less you see of me, the better you will like me." Comparatively, the small body of Democrats in town gave Douglas a warm welcome to Knoxville.

Nearly all the wagons and the floats approaching Galesburg displayed banners or streamers inscribed with slogans voicing the humor and partisanship of the two factions. Among them could be read "Honest Abe," "the rail splitter," "free states," "free men," and "Lincoln the Giant Killer." Lincoln was even called the snapping turtle and Douglas

was called the lordly lion. Republicans said that it is better to have a live dog than a dead lion. But Lincoln did not care; he still stood his ground and expressed his beliefs.

The crowd on Knox College campus grew denser as the spectators from the streets began to seek places among those already taken. Galesburg was one of those towns where it had been agreed before hand that Douglas should speak first. The 1858 debate was important because a U. S. Senate seat from Illinois was at stake between Lincoln and Douglas. Seven debates in all were conducted in each of the state's seven congressional districts.

Douglas believed the chief aim of the nation should be to expand its border and its institutions, extending the area of freedom for whites. The morality of slavery to Douglas was a matter of local opinion, though he probably was personally opposed to the institution. To Lincoln the immorality of slavery was absolute. Such an absolute ought to rule in legislating for new territories like Kansas. Lincoln stated that in the most memorable line of the Galesburg debate, Douglas was blowing out the moral lights around us when he maintained that anyone who wanted slaves had the right to hold them. Henry Clay said that those who would repress all tendencies to liberty and ultimate emancipations of slaves must go back to the era of our liberty and independence and muzzle the cannon that thunders its annual joys return.

On August 21, many historians attended the debate that marked the turning point in the national future of both the Republican and Democratic Party. During the Galesburg debate, Lincoln answered seven questions. One important question posed to Lincoln was, why are you fighting for the rights of black people? He responded by

saying that slaves are just the same as us; they deserve the right to be free as much as the whites.

Douglas uttered many famous quotes during this debate, one of which he stated as an answer to the second question, “Can the people of a United States territory in any lawful way against the wish of any citizen of the United States exclude slavery from its limits prior to the formation of the state constitution.” Douglas responded by saying we would not have slavery without the support of the local police regulations.

Douglas gained the Senate but lost the presidency. The young Republican Party failed to win enough seats to elect Lincoln to the Senate, however, Lincoln held his own against the leading Democrats through his speeches in the Cooper Union, New York, and throughout New England. Lincoln was the voice of moderation and ultimately became the Republican nominee for president of the United States.

Douglas did not make it easy for Lincoln. Douglas tried to revive the Mexican War issue making it a liability for Lincoln and commented on Lincoln’s opposition to the war and failure to support American troops. Lincoln replied by saying

I think my friend the judge, is at fault when he charges me at the time when I was in Congress of having opposed our soldiers who were fighting in the Mexican war. The judge did not make his charges very distinctly, but I can tell you what he can prove by referring to the record. You remember I was an old Whig, and whenever the Democratic Party tried to get me to vote that the war had been righteously begun by the President I would not do it. But whenever they ask for money, or land-warrants, or anything to pay the soldiers there, during all that time, I gave the same vote as Judge Douglas.

Lincoln lost the senate seat but, two years later, won the presidency.

In the end we all know that Lincoln and Douglas were two great men. They were just fighting for their peoples’ rights and what they believed was right. [From Earnest E. Calkins, *They Broke the Prairie*; William A. Degregorio, *The Complete Book of U. S.*

Presidents; Paul Findley, *Lincoln*; Knox College Special Collections and Archives, “The Fifth Lincoln-Douglas Debate October 7, 1858 Galesburg, Illinois,” www.library.knox.edu/sca/sca/cfm (Aug. 16, 2007); Edwin Erle Sparks, ed., *Lincoln Series, Vol. 1, The Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*; Richard M. Weaver, “Created Equal? The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858.” *National Review*, November 5, 1990.]